

Senator Margarita Prentice

Spring 2004



**Senator
Margarita Prentice**

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Sen. Margarita Prentice represents the 11th Legislative District. She is the ranking Democrat on the Senate Ways & Means Committee and also serves on the Financial Services, Insurance & Housing Committee.

If you wish to have your name removed from future mailing lists, contact Labels and Lists at 800-842-5478 or email: operations@lalnet.com

Dear Friends:

In January, the Legislature met for a short, hectic, 60-day session that included all the inherent challenges associated with any session. My own personal challenge was serving as the ranking Democrat on the Ways & Means Committee. Negotiating the supplemental budget was rewarding and excruciating. In the end, the Senate and House of Representatives made reasonable compromises, and the most troublesome cuts were restored without new taxes.

One of the most difficult undertakings we faced was replacing the blanket primary, which was recently found to be unconstitutional. This inspired robust, inflammatory debate on the Senate floor! Other tasks included rolling back premiums on health care coverage for low-income kids; increasing salaries for home health care workers; increasing higher education enrollments; passing a transportation budget; and creating business incentives and job opportunities. This newsletter contains some of the highlights that directly impact our district. You are welcome to contact me on these or other issues of interest.

Thanks to all of you who e-mailed, snail-mailed, or called the office or Legislative Hot Line during the session. Your comments and concerns are essential to my representing our district and I appreciate hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Margarita Prentice
State Senator
11th Legislative District

Health Care

Rolling back health care premiums for the poorest kids

In the 2003 session, the Legislature added monthly Medicaid premiums for children in low-income families, which were scheduled to take effect this year. This would have left as many as 20,000 children without any coverage – children from families that struggle to meet their most basic needs. While eliminating the premiums would have been preferable, the final budget removes the premiums for the poorest children.

Medical malpractice

Escalating liability premiums for health care providers is a serious problem. One of the only bills the Senate passed to address the issue would have limited jury awards to \$350,000. Fortunately, the House did not vote on the bill. The reasons for the accelerated costs are very complex and we need to help ensure that health care recipients are not harmed by “fixing” the cost of liability policies. We’ll be revisiting the issue again next session.

Raises for home health care workers

The Legislature approved a 50-cent per-hour pay raise and health benefits for the state’s home health care workers – including agency providers. This is a long-awaited victory for those performing physically and mentally demanding tasks that help keep our frail and elderly in their own homes.

Montana Primary

New primary doesn’t affect general election

The governor vetoed certain sections of the bill the Legislature passed, effectively leaving us with the “Montana” primary. Voters will choose among candidates from a single party in partisan races, in addition to voting for any person in the non-partisan races. Their choice of parties is completely confidential and no party registration is required. Independent voters have a choice of any party on a year-to-year basis, while maintaining their privacy by not being identified by either political party.

In the November general election, there is no change from the current system. Voters will have the choice of voting for any candidate, regardless of party, including the smaller parties, independents or write-ins.

But there continues to be much controversy over the “Montana” solution, and lawsuits and initiatives could help define the final primary.

K-12 and Higher Education

Levy equalization

The budget includes \$3.6 million to provide tax relief for property-poor school districts around the state.

Learning Assistance Program

The Learning Assistance Program (LAP) is crucial to helping struggling students get up to grade level in reading and math. At-risk students behind in grade school may never catch up without effective intervention. Unfortunately, the final budget did not include the governor’s proposed \$7 million more for LAP. These funds would have been used to help additional students living in poverty.

Higher education enrollments

The final budget funds approximately 3,000 new enrollments for our state’s higher education students. This is good news for our future work force.

Protecting Homeowners

I continue to be a member of the Financial Services, Insurance & Housing Committee. Two of my bills responding to housing concerns were voted out of that committee and signed into law by the governor.

Sex offender information

Buying a home in a new, unfamiliar neighborhood will be less worrisome thanks to SB 6153. The bill adds a "Notice to Buyer" to the Seller Disclosure Form stating that the location of registered sex offenders is available from local law enforcement agencies. The statement does not infer or indicate the actual presence of registered sex offenders in the neighborhood.

More options for home buyers

SB 6593 removes laws that do not allow placement of manufactured homes. City and county laws or ordinances must apply equally to all homes. Manufactured homes can be required to have permanent foundations, concrete between the base of the home and the ground, and meet local neighborhood design standards. This bill will provide homeowners more affordable housing options.

Senior Property Tax Relief

We also passed SB 5034, which increases the income eligibility to \$40,000 a year – up from \$34,000 – for senior citizens and disabled people who want to defer portions of their property taxes. It also exempts the homeowner from all excess levies if their income is between \$30,001 and \$35,000. Contact the senior exemption office at (206) 296-3920 for more information.

Transportation

Online driver's license renewal

Drivers will be able to renew their licenses online beginning in September. Licenses are valid for five years. Drivers can renew a license online at the end of those five years, but must go to a Department of Licensing office for the next renewal.

State Route 99

A 2.4 mile strip between state Route 518 and state Route 599 will be transferred to jurisdiction of the city of Tukwila in June. The traffic pattern has changed considerably in this area so it is no longer a major connecting arterial. The city has already begun a dramatic transformation making this an attractive, community-oriented main street.

Small-trailer fees

Many outraged citizens called my office because of the jump in tab fees for small utility trailers. Efforts to get those reduced were not successful this session. We will definitely be working on a solution during the interim and again next session.

Prescription Bill Update

Toll-free "Senior Services" number

Many drug companies provide low-income patients with certain drugs at little or no cost. But navigating the multiple programs can be time-consuming and overwhelming. Now seniors can get help by calling Senior Services (888) 435-3377 between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. or visiting www.seniorservices.org on the Web.

"Brown bag" educational programs

A program operated by the Area Agencies on Aging allows seniors to bring their medicines and supplements to a local senior center for free advice about whether they are taking the right medicines in the right doses, and whether cheaper options might be available. For more information call Senior Services at (888) 435-3377.

Prescription drug discount program

People between 50 and 65 – or those disabled between 19 and 49 – with incomes below \$26,940 for an individual or \$36,360 for a family of two, may qualify for the mail-order only discount program. Discounts are expected to range from 10 percent to 25 percent off retail prices. Participants will pay an annual fee for administrative costs. The target date is early June. For more information, visit the Health Care Authority's Web site at www.rx.wa.gov or call (888) 435-3377.

Protecting the Environment

Our state now has the nation's toughest siting standards for new power plants. This will slow down global warming by reducing the effects of carbon-dioxide emissions.

The bill is part of a package that promises a cleaner, greener future for our state. Other bills deal with stormwater runoff, oil-spill prevention in coastal and inland waters, and a crackdown on shippers' bringing foreign invasive species into Washington waters through ballast-water discharge.

Senate Page Program

It is always a pleasure to have students from our local schools serve as Senate pages. A student must be 14 years old but not yet 17 by the time he or she pages and will be in Olympia for a week working within the Legislature. Applications are accepted on a first come first served basis and are available through my office or online at www.leg.wa.gov/senate/sadm/senpage.htm.



Nicole Cruz



Amy Ostrand



Ryan Reggio



Senator Margarita Prentice with page Kaitlyn Jones.



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